

Morales still popular in a divided Bolivia

Bolivian President Evo Morales has won major successes in his first year at the cost of an increasingly divided country.

The Miami Herald
Jan. 23, 2007

LIMA - Bolivian President Evo Morales celebrated his first year in office Monday with a vow to continue pushing to transform his poor and backward nation through a "democratic revolution" that has increasingly rattled the middle and wealthy classes.

At one point during a 4 ½-hour anniversary speech to Congress, boycotted by the main opposition, he said his critics ``should be worried because this little Indian won't be leaving office easily."

In another sign of the political divisions, which some Bolivians say could ultimately lead to civil war, leftist groups trying to force the resignation of La Paz's governor on Monday shut down El Alto, the indigenous shantytown on the rim of the city of La Paz and a strong base of Morales support.

The first president in Bolivia's history to describe himself as indigenous, Morales has filled his cabinet and key senior posts with Indians previously shut out of power, openly allied himself with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Cuba's Fidel Castro, begun expropriating "unproductive" land from big landholders to give to the landless and carried out a so-called nationalization of the crucial gas sector that forced foreign companies to accept substantially higher taxes.

The latter move sextupled income from gas taxes for the government to \$1.6 billion in 2006, and has proven extraordinarily popular in a country where people tend to blame foreign exploiters for their problems.

WORKING MAN'S HERO

"People in the working classes identify with him," Eduardo Gamarra, a Bolivian native who heads Florida International University's Latin and Caribbean Center, said by telephone from Miami. ``When I do focus groups [in Bolivia], people repeatedly say, `He's one of us.'

“The complaint [by others] is that his ministers are not educated and don't have Harvard degrees. It's better today to have a degree from the University of Havana.”

A poll published Monday by the La Paz daily La Razón gave Morales a 59 percent approval rating in the major cities. Morales is considered to be even more popular in the countryside.

Bolivia has been badly divided in recent years with the Indian majority making a historic push to gain political control for the first time from the light-skinned descendants of the Spanish elite. This culminated in Morales' election and his inauguration last Jan. 22.

But his effort to redraw Bolivia's Constitution has stalled. The assembly elected by voters last year to carry out the work has yet to debate a single proposal, with members consumed by a fight over whether approving the new provisions requires a simple majority vote -- as Morales' supporters want -- or a two-thirds vote -- as his opponents favor and the assembly's own rules seem to call for.

“I don't see how they'll resolve a series of questions before the Constituent Assembly on land reform, how to share gas revenues, autonomy for departments [states] and indigenous autonomy,” John Carey, a Dartmouth professor, said by telephone. “The two sides are miles apart.”

Indeed, Bolivia seems more divided than ever before, in the wake of a dispute between Morales' traditionally marginalized supporters and his better-off opponents that came to head two weeks ago during pitched street battles in the central city of Cochabamba that left two dead and more than 100 injured.

The dispute began when coca growers allied with Morales laid siege to government offices to demand the resignation of Cochabamba Gov. Manfred Reyes for proposing a referendum on whether his state's residents want greater autonomy from the national government.

The setting seemed ominously fitting since Cochabamba serves as the symbolic geographical divide between Morales and his poor indigenous supporters in the western highlands and his opponents, who mostly live in the lowlands in the east.

LESSONS FROM PAST

"Are the lessons from the deaths in Cochabamba that they'll ratchet up the political conflict or will they find a way to resolve them? It's an open question," said Jim Shultz, an American who heads a nonprofit group in Cochabamba sympathetic to Morales' aims.

"This was groups of citizens against other groups of citizens that has the potential to be much worse in the future. That's what civil wars look like. I see virtually no one trying to use their voices to create a middle ground."

Other analysts, while agreeing that more violence is possible, also note that Bolivians have a tradition of moving to the precipice of the political abyss only to pull back.

The one bright spot that seems to draw everyone's agreement is the economy.

The U.N.'s Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean put Bolivia's growth at 4.5 percent in 2006 and projects another 4 percent this year. Both numbers are better than in past years, although below the Latin American average. High international prices for Bolivia's gold, tin, silver, soybeans and gas are propelling the economy, but so far are creating few jobs.

In fact, said Napoleon Pacheco, a La Paz-based economist, despite Morales' gas "nationalization" and his incendiary leftist rhetoric, he is mostly following the neo-liberal model begun some 20 years ago.

"The government is proud of the budget surplus," Pacheco said. "You can't be more neo-liberal than that."